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Put Safety at the Top of Your List!

State Fire Marshal Stephen D. Coan said "Put safety at the top of your list!" as he issued safety tips for a safe holiday season. "The first thing on your shopping list should be new batteries for your smoke alarms, or even new smoke alarms if they are more than ten years old," said Coan.

On December 21, 2003, at 7:46 p.m., a candle in the kitchen ignited a plastic holiday decoration in a Natick home. The smoke detectors but did not operate because of missing batteries. Total estimated dollar loss was \$5,050.

Prevent Candle Fires: Follow the Circle of Safety Rules

"So many of our holiday rituals involve candles, so we need to be especially careful with them at this time," Coan said. "When candles come in contact with holiday decorations, are left burning unattended, burn down too close to the holder, or are knocked over by pets or children, fires start easily and quickly spread," Marshal Coan warned. "Please burn candles inside of a one-foot *Circle of Safety*, free of anything that can burn," he added.

On December 6, 2003, at 3:12 p.m., the Hudson Fire Department was called to an apartment fire that started when a candle ignited wooden decoration in the living room.

Electric Holiday Lights

Purchase new lights that are listed by an approved testing agency such as Underwriter's Laboratory (UL) or Factory Mutual (FM). Be sure to follow the manufacturer's directions.

Check lights carefully for frayed wires, broken plugs or sockets and loose connections. Hanukkah and Christmas lights are used year after year. Discarding and replacing damaged lights is less expensive than having a fire. When putting lights on a Christmas tree, make sure the bulb itself is not touching the tree. Keep decorations that use bulbs away from items such as curtains that could catch fire.

Turn off your tree lights and electric decorations whenever you leave the house and when you go to bed at night. Lights can short circuit or overheat and start a fire. Avoid overloading extension cords, a common cause of fires, by using no more than three strands of lights on a single extension cord. Remember to never put cords under rugs or behind furniture that can “pinch” them.

Cut Tree Safety

- Water your live tree every day.
- Buy a cut tree as fresh as possible. A newly cut tree properly cared for, can stay green and fire safe for several weeks.
- Never use a cut tree in a place of public assembly (such as an office, apartment or hotel lobby, restaurant, etc.).
- Turn off the lights when you leave the house or go to bed for the night.
- Never use lighted candles as decorations.

Last holiday season there were two serious Christmas tree fires in Massachusetts. While we are fortunate that in today’s world these fires are few and far between, they are extremely dangerous when they do occur. A Christmas tree will act as a blowtorch if it catches fire.

On December 22, 2003 at 4:46 a.m., the Gloucester Fire Department was called to a fatal fire in a single-family home. One of the occupants had thrown a ‘jumping jack’ firework at the base of a dried out Christmas tree. The tree quickly ignited, and the fire continued to grow inside the living room. One of the occupants tried to unsuccessfully to remove the tree. The victim, a 45-year old woman, was overcome by heat and smoke in a rear bedroom three other people were injured in this fire. There were no smoke detectors present in the building.

On January 4, 2004, at 2:15 p.m., the Springfield Fire Department was called to a fire in a single-family home that started when a child playing with a lighter ignited the family’s Christmas tree. Fortunately, there were no injuries associated with this fire. The smoke detectors operated and the estimated dollar loss was \$15,000.

How to Select a Tree

Lift the tree and tap the butt on the ground. If green needles fall off, the tree is too dry! Grab a branch near the top and pull your hand along it slowly. Needles should not fall off. The tree is already quite dry if you bend a needle and it breaks before bending in half.

Putting Up the Tree

Make a fresh cut an inch or two off the bottom to help with absorption, right before placing it in the stand. A tree will try to “heal its wound” by enclosing the previous cut in sap and this hinders water absorption.

Place your tree in a non-tip style stand with wide feet. Make sure it cannot be tipped over by children or pets. Use extra wires if needed.

Placing the Tree

Put trees and other decorations out of the way of traffic. Keep doorways and exits clear.

Place your tree and other decorations away from heaters, fireplaces, candles and all other sources of heat and flame. Heat makes your tree dry out faster and any heat source could make it catch fire.

Dispose of Your Tree Carefully

Remove your tree soon after the holidays. A dry tree is fuel for a fire both inside and outside your house. An abandoned tree is frequently attractive to vandals so take advantage of your community's pick-up day if available.

Artificial Trees

Select an artificial tree with a flame retardant label. These are best for families who want a tree but will be away for several days or who may otherwise not be able to care properly for a live tree.

Do not use electric lights on metallic trees; faulty lights could charge the tree and electrocute anyone who touched it. Spotlights provide safer and more effective illumination.

For more information on fire safety, contact your local fire department or the Office of the State Fire Marshal at 1-877-9 NO FIRE or on-line at www.state.ma.us/dfs.